

# AUSTRALIA

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is the national policy for regulated and quality-assured qualifications in Australian education and training, covering the secondary school, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education sectors. One of the earliest and longest-standing frameworks of its kind, the AQF was introduced on 1 January 1995 and was phased in over five years, with full implementation by 2000. It replaced the Register of Australian Tertiary Education (1990–1995) which covered qualifications in the VET and higher education sectors.

The AQF was reviewed in 2009–2010 in order to keep it relevant to and consistent with current national policy directions in education and training and build confidence in the qualification outcomes. The review process included the development of a more up-to-date levels-based architecture for the framework.

This strengthened AQF was endorsed by Australia's Commonwealth and State and Territory Education Ministers in March 2011. Implementation commenced in July 2011 and will be completed by 31 December 2014.

## 1. CHALLENGES THE NQF WOULD NEED TO ADDRESS

The development of the AQF needs to be understood within the context of the economic and societal challenges Australia has faced over the past 30 years. In the 1980s the Australian economy was in crisis. Unemployment was high and structural problems rife.

The Training Reform Agenda of 1988 aimed to respond to this situation by reforming VET provision, shifting from a curriculum-based to a skills-based approach in order to standardize training across the nation and make it more responsive to industry needs. The Industry Training Advisory Boards, tripartite bodies comprising employer, employee and Australian Government representatives, played an important role in this process, promoting and developing competency-based training in their respective industry sectors. They continue to play an important role today in their new format as Industry Skills Councils (see section on Stakeholders below).

Standardizing VET provision across the nation was not an easy task, as there were significant discrepancies between the different Australian states and territories, and moving across borders was not always straightforward. A number of reforms were put in place to address this, the most significant being the establishment of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFRT). The NFRT set out nationally valid principles and processes for the accreditation of courses, the registration of training providers, credit transfer, and the assessment and recognition of prior learning. These early steps towards a nationally consistent framework of qualifications across the VET and higher education sectors gave rise to a debate about the application of competence-based standards to higher education. A number of stakeholders in the higher education sector took the view that achievement of competences was a necessary but not a sufficient outcome of learning. In this context, a 1991 consultation paper identified a number of shortcomings in existing VET sector qualifications, including the following:

- An overly rigid time-frame for achieving qualifications. The system according to which courses begin at a fixed entry point and are measured in full-time years (or part-time equivalent) should be replaced by a more flexible one in which qualifications can be achieved in a greater variety of ways, such as by completing a qualification step-by-step or acquiring qualifications formally as well as non-formally.
- Unclear definition of certificate levels and inconsistent use of titles. In some cases, the authors noted, the same certificate might mean anything from basic preparation for employment through to advanced professional level skills. In particular, the title of Advanced Certificate was used inconsistently. The titles of Diploma and Associate Diploma were problematic because they are used differently in Australia and overseas (whereas in Australia the term Diploma refers to a professional qualification, in other countries it refers to a para-professional qualification).
- Lack of satisfactory qualifications beyond craft certificates.

A 1993 consultation paper continued the focus on the VET sector, emphasizing the need to provide for more levels of VET qualifications and stressed the importance of improving communication and mobility between the three sectors.

In light of the challenges in the existing VET sector qualifications, the Ministers for Vocational Education, Employment and Training established a working group to develop a proposal for a national qualifications framework.

## 2. MAIN POLICY OBJECTIVES

In implementing the strengthened AQF, Australia's objectives are to provide a contemporary and flexible framework that:

- accommodates the diversity of purposes of Australian education and training now and in the future;
- supports the development and maintenance of pathways which allow learners to move freely between different education and training sectors and between those sectors and the labour market;
- supports individuals' lifelong learning goals by providing mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning and experience;
- allows individuals to gain qualifications which are regulated and quality-assured;
- supports graduates' and workers' national and international mobility;
- brings Australian qualifications into line with the qualifications of other countries, thus increasing the international recognition of Australian qualifications.

## 3. INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS AND LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS

The current AQF is an overarching national framework that continues a well-established system of national tertiary awards dating back to the 1970s. As the responsibility for different educational sectors lies with state and territory governments as well as the Commonwealth, it has been vitally important to involve *all* stakeholders in developing nationally agreed qualifications in order to maintain quality assurance and consistency. To this end, in 1972 a national registration authority was put in place to standardize qualifications and their nomenclature across the states and territories, and to promote understanding of the qualifications system in Australia and overseas.

In 1990, the Register of Australian Tertiary Education (RATE) was established. The RATE system of qualifications was widely but not exclusively used (for example, it was not used in Western Australia) and did not cover all levels of VET. It was particularly deficient at the level of crafts, with the result that some states (for example New South Wales) continued to use their own systems of craft certificates at that level. This lack of uniformity and comprehensiveness limited mutual recognition between states and territories and acted as a barrier to the emergence of a truly national VET sector. From 1995 the RATE framework was phased out and replaced by the AQF, largely in response to the growing economic demand for skilled workers and paraprofessionals and the need for a truly national system of qualifications. Implementation of the AQF was phased in over five years to allow for

acceptance by all stakeholders. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) oversaw the development and implementation of the AQF. MCEETYA was composed of ministers with responsibility for education and training from both national and state and territory governments. These ministers agreed to establish the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB) to implement and monitor the AQF and recommend action to be taken to achieve its goals. AQFAB was required to report to the public and to ministers comprising the MCEETYA. To fulfill its functions, AQFAB liaised closely with schools, VET institutes and universities, as well as with the bodies responsible for accrediting courses. This liaison role was crucial in ensuring stakeholder support for the AQF and allowing the reform initiatives to progress. Membership of AQFAB included representatives from all three education sectors as well as from industry, trade unions, government and the community.

In 2008 AQFAB was replaced by the AQF Council with the primary objective of strengthening the AQF and making it up to date and relevant to Australia's needs. The AQF Council's ongoing role is to implement and maintain the AQF, ensuring that it is nationally and internationally robust and supports flexible cross-sectoral linkages and pathways. Further information on the AQF Council, including its terms of reference, is available from the AQF website: [www.aqf.edu.au](http://www.aqf.edu.au). The AQF Council reports to ministers of the Australian Government and the eight state and territory governments through the Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (which replaced MCEETYA). The membership of the AQF Council comprises experts from various backgrounds, including unions, industry, private companies, the three education sectors, the Commonwealth and state/territory governments. This differs from the earlier practice of appointing members as 'representatives' of particular organizations.

Industry leadership of VET has been a key feature of the Australian system for almost two decades. Industrial organizations, which are generally registered under state or federal workplace relations legislation such as the *Fair Work (Registered Organizations) Act 2009*, participate closely in setting the national training agenda for schools and VET/higher education institutions. This in turn influences the direction of the national qualifications framework. Professional organizations also play an important role in Australia's training system.

Industry is also represented on the National Skills Standards Council (NSSC), which is the body charged with the oversight of Training Packages and training provider quality. The NSSC provides final endorsement to Training Packages developed by Industry Skills Councils (ISCs), and is central to ensuring that the delivery of VET meets the needs of business and employers. The eleven ISCs are privately registered companies run by industry-led boards of directors and standing committees, but funded substantially by the Australian Government. They give all industries, peak bodies, enterprises, unions, training organizations and governments a voice in Australia's VET system. Through the network of ISCs, industry has a direct say in defining the skills required in the workplace.

A Training Package is an integrated set of nationally endorsed units of competency, qualifications and assessment guidelines designed for a specific industry, industry sector or enterprise. Training Packages provide an important link between the VET sector and the labour market. Training Packages are developed through a national consultation and validation process involving industry representatives and other VET stakeholders. A Training Package describes the skills and knowledge needed to perform effectively in the workplace, but does not prescribe a training programme. Registered Training Organizations (RTOs) develop and deliver training programmes based on Training Package specifications to meet the needs of individuals or enterprises.

## 4. LEVELS AND DESCRIPTORS AND USE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

Table 1. Australian Qualifications Framework

	AQF qualifications mapped across the three education sectors		
	Senior Secondary schooling	Vocational Education and Training	Higher Education
10			Higher Doctoral Degree
10			Doctoral Degree
9			Master's Degree (coursework/research/extended)
8		Graduate Diploma	Graduate Diploma
8		Graduate Certificate	Graduate Certificate
8			Bachelor Honours Degree
7			Bachelor Degree
6		Advanced Diploma	Associate Degree/ Advanced Diploma
5		Diploma	Diploma
4		Certificate IV	
3		Certificate III	
2		Certificate II	
1		Certificate I	
Not located at an AQF level	Senior Secondary Certificate of Education		

Source: AQFC, 2011.

The strengthened AQF comprises specifications for 14 qualification types (see Table 1 above). Each of these qualifications is integrated by the relevant sector into a 10-level structure. The Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE) is included in the AQF but not located at a particular level. The strengthened AQF incorporates a number of changes to its predecessor. A separate Bachelor Honours Degree has been introduced along with three types of Master's Degree. Previously there were only two types of Master's Degree: the Master's Degree (Research) and the Master's Degree (Coursework). The Master's Degree (Extended) has been added to prepare graduates to engage in a profession. The strengthened AQF specifies two types of doctorate, the Professional Doctoral Degree and the Research Doctoral Degree.

## 5. PROGRESSION PATHWAYS AND RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

An important aspect of the AQF is the development of closer connections between secondary education, VET and higher education. The AQF aims to strengthen the relationships between these three sectors by linking qualifications across and between them in both structured and unstructured ways. Qualification linkages enable individual learners to move efficiently from one qualification to another. They also promote lifelong learning by helping to create a more open, accessible and relevant post-compulsory education system.

The successful creation of qualification linkages is dependent on effective mechanisms for *credit transfer* (between individual components of existing awards) and for the *recognition of prior learning* (by which individuals' existing competences and experience can be harnessed and put towards a formal qualification).

## 6. REFERENCING TO REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The AQF is not formally linked to a regional qualifications framework or to any other national qualifications frameworks. However, Australia does maintain communications with other nations and regional organizations on matters relating to NQFs. There has been considerable interest internationally in the AQF as a model for NQFs elsewhere, and Australia has participated in a number of international forums to discuss the potential for regional frameworks.

The AQF Council has established an International Alignment Committee to advise it on referencing and/or alignment of the AQF to other frameworks. A theoretical exercise was undertaken in 2010 to explore the possibility of aligning the AQF with the Irish NQF. The project mapped aspects of each framework in order to arrive at a valid comparison between the two. This study did not in itself constitute an alignment or formal referencing of the two frameworks, but it did demonstrate that such an alignment would be feasible, and that Australia is well able to engage in dialogue with countries outside of the Asia-Pacific region.

A policy dialogue was held in December 2010 to discuss common challenges faced by the European Union and Australia in terms of transnational transparency, comparability and recognition of qualifications. The dialogue, preceded by a two-day International Peer Learning Activity on Qualifications Frameworks, aimed to encourage mutual learning from national and transnational developments and to explore how qualifications frameworks can serve as instruments for international cooperation. Australia and the European Commission concluded a joint study exploring the role that qualifications frameworks can play in facilitating the mobility of learners and workers and making qualifications more internationally comparable and transparent. This study focused in particular on the relationships between the AQF and the EQF as well as the NQFs of individual European countries, and how these relationships might affect the mobility of learners and workers between Australia and Europe.

Australia is also involved in the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA) Capacity Building for National Qualifications Frameworks Project, which aims to harmonize the regulatory arrangements which underpin the recognition and quality assurance of qualifications across all AANZFTA countries. The project will explore the scope for development of mutually comparable NQFs in the region, based on a common reference framework.

## 7. IMPORTANT LESSONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Australia has learned a number of important lessons from the development of the AQF in the early 1990s and the strengthening process undertaken during 2010–2011, the most important of which are summarized below.

- A national qualifications framework is only one part of a fully functioning quality-assured training and education system. Addressing national challenges requires all parts of the system to work together, especially when engaging with regulatory bodies.
- An NQF must be relevant to stakeholder and economic needs, and address identified challenges.
- An NQF requires ongoing evaluation and reform in order to remain at the peak of relevance to prevailing economic and social conditions. Changes should wherever possible build upon existing structures which already enjoy stakeholder support and engagement.
- Engagement and consultation with stakeholders, particularly within industry, are crucial to the development of an NQF. A bureaucratic, top-heavy process is likely to receive less sector support than one that effectively engages all stakeholders.
- Complex reforms such as those involved in implementing an NQF require a long-term implementation plan that allows the time needed to achieve results. It is important that stakeholders know this and are supported through the implementation process. Information and training sessions about the framework are of paramount importance throughout the development, agreement and implementation phases.
- Effective leadership is crucial. Reforms must be driven by people who are committed, influential and persuasive in order to ensure full implementation and take-up of a framework.

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